It took some time before the significance of what I was looking at sank into my “civilized” mind. I had spent more than two years living in the jungles of South America with Stone Age Indians. Little boys traveled with us when we enlisted their fathers as guides and crew, and we often stayed for days or weeks in the villages of the Yequana Indians where the children played all day unsupervised by adults or adolescents. It only struck me after the fourth of my five expeditions that I had never seen a conflict either between two children or between a child and an adult. Not only did the children not hit one another, they did not even argue. They obeyed their elders instantly and cheerfully, and often carried babies around with them while playing or helping with the work.
Where were the “terrible twos”? Where were the tantrums, the struggle to “get their own way,” the selfishness, the destructiveness and carelessness of their own safety that we call normal? Where was the nagging, the discipline, the “boundaries” needed to curb their contrariness? Where, indeed, was the adversarial relationship we take for granted between parent and child? Where was the blaming, the punishing, or for that matter, where was any sign of permissiveness?

The Yequana Way

There is a Yequana expression equivalent to “Boys will be boys”; it has a positive connotation, however, and refers to the boys’ high spirits as they run about and whoop and swim in the river or play Yequana badminton (a noncompetitive game in which all players keep the cornhusk shuttlecock in the air as long as possible by batting it with open hands). I heard many shouts and much laughter when the boys played outdoors, yet the moment they were inside the huts, they lowered their voices to maintain the reigning quiet. They never interrupted an adult conversation. In fact, they rarely spoke at all in the company of adults, confining themselves to listening and performing little services such as passing around food or drink.

Far from being disciplined or suppressed into compliant behavior, these little angels are relaxed and cheerful. And they grow up to be happy, confident, cooperative adults!

How do they do it? What do the Yequana know about human nature that we do not? What can we do to attain non-adversarial relationships with our children in toddlerhood, or later if they have gotten off to a bad start?

The “Civilized” Experience
In my private practice, people consult me to overcome the deleterious effects of beliefs about themselves formed in childhood. Many of these people are parents, keen not to subject their offspring to the kind of alienation they suffered at the hands of their own usually well-meaning parents. They would like to know how they can rear their children happily and painlessly. Most of these parents have taken my advice and, following the Yequana example, kept their babies in physical contact all day and night until they began to crawl. Some, however, are surprised and dismayed to find their tots becoming “demanding” or angry—often toward their most caretaking parent. No amount of dedication or self-sacrifice improves the babies’ disposition. Increased efforts to placate them do nothing but augment frustration in both parent and child. Why, then, do the Yequana not have the same experience?

The crucial difference is that the Yequana are not child-centered. They may occasionally nuzzle their babies affectionately, play peek-a-boo, or sing to them, yet the great majority of the caretaker’s time is spent paying attention to something else...not the baby! Children taking care of babies also regard baby care as a non-activity and, although they carry them everywhere, rarely give them direct attention. Thus, Yequana babies find themselves in the midst of activities they will later join as they proceed through the stages of creeping, crawling, walking, and talking. The panoramic view of their future life’s experiences, behavior, pace, and language provides a rich basis for their developing participation.

Being played with, talked to, or admired all day deprives the babe of this in-arms spectator phase that would feel right to him. Unable to say what he needs, he will act out his discontentment. He is trying to get his caretaker’s attention, yet—and here is the cause of the understandable confusion—his purpose is to get the caretaker to change his unsatisfactory experience, to go about her own business with confidence and without seeming to ask his permission. Once the situation is corrected, the attention-getting behavior we mistake for a permanent impulse can subside. The same principle applies in the stages following the in-arms phase.

One devoted mother on the East Coast, when beginning sessions with me on the telephone, was near the end of her tether. She was at war with her beloved three-year-old son, who was often barging into her, sometimes hitting her, and shouting, “Shut up!” among other distressing expressions of anger and disrespect. She had tried reasoning with him, asking him what he wanted her to do, bribing him, and speaking sweetly as long as she could before losing her patience and shouting at him. Afterward, she would be consumed with guilt and try to “make it up to him” with apologies, explanations, hugs, or special treats to prove her love—whereupon her precious little boy would respond by issuing new ill-tempered demands.
Sometimes she would stop trying to please him and go tight-lipped about her own activities, despite his howls and protestations. If she finally managed to hold out long enough for him to give up trying to control her and calm down, he might gaze up at her out of his meltingly beautiful eyes and say, “I love you, Mommy!” and she, almost abject in her gratitude for this momentary reprieve from the leaden guilt in her bosom, would soon be eating out of his dimpled, jam-stained little hand again. He would become bossy, then angry and rude, and the whole heartbreaking scenario would be replayed, whereupon my client’s despair would deepen.

I hear many similar stories from clients in the United States, Canada, Germany, and England, so I believe it is fair to say that this trouble is prevalent among the most well-educated, wellmeaning parents in Western societies. They are struggling with children who seem to want to keep their adults under their control and obedient to their every whim. To make matters worse, many people believe that this phenomenon bears witness to the widely held notion that our species, alone among all creatures, is by nature antisocial and requires years of opposition (“discipline,” “socializing”) to become viable, or “good.” As the Yequana, the Balinese, and numerous other peoples outside our cultural orbit reveal, however, such a notion is utterly erroneous. Members of one society respond to the conditioning of their culture like the members of any other.

The Way to Harmony

What, then, is causing this unhappiness? What have we misunderstood about our human nature? And what can we do to approach the harmony the Yequana enjoy with their children?

It appears that many parents of toddlers, in their anxiety to be neither negligent nor disrespectful, have gone overboard in what may seem to be the other direction. Like the thankless martyrs of the in-arms stage, they have become centered upon their children instead of being occupied by adult activities that the children can watch, follow, imitate, and assist in as is their natural tendency. In other words, because a toddler wants to learn what his people do, he expects to be able to center his attention on an adult who is centered on her own business. An adult who stops whatever she is doing and tries to ascertain what her child wants her to do is short-circuiting this expectation. Just as significantly, she appears to the tot not to know how to behave, to be lacking in confidence and, even more alarmingly, looking for guidance from him, a two or three year old who is relying on her to be calm, competent, and sure of herself.
A toddler’s fairly predictable reaction to parental uncertainty is to push his parents even further off-balance, testing for a place where they will stand firm and thus allay his anxiety about who is in charge. He may continue to draw pictures on the wall after his mother has pleaded with him to desist, in an apologetic voice that lets him know she does not believe he will obey. When she then takes away his markers, all the while showing fear of his wrath, he—as surely as he is a social creature—meets her expectations and flies into a screaming rage.

If misreading his anger, she tries even harder to ascertain what he wants, pleads, explains, and appears ever more desperate to placate him, the child will be impelled to make more outrageous, more unacceptable demands. This he must continue to do until at last she does take overleadership and he can feel that order is restored. He may still not have a calm, confident, reliable authority figure to learn from, as his mother is now moving from the point of losing her temper to the point at which guilt and doubts about her competence are again rearing their wobbly heads. Nevertheless, he will have the meager reassurance of seeing that when the chips were down, she did relieve him of command and of his panicky feeling that he should somehow know what she should do.

Put simply, when a child is impelled to try to control the behavior of an adult, it is not because the child wants to succeed, but because the child needs to be certain that the adult knows what he or she is doing. Furthermore, the child cannot resist such testing until the adult stands firm and the child can have that certainty. No child would dream of trying to take over the initiative from an adult unless that child receives a clear message that such action is expected—not wanted, but expected! Moreover, once the child feels he has attained control, he becomes confused and frightened and must go to any extreme to compel the adult to take the leadership back where it belongs.

When this is understood, the parents’ fear of imposing upon their child is allayed, and they see that there is no call for adversariality. By maintaining control, they are fulfilling their beloved child’s needs, rather than acting in opposition to them.

It took my East Coast client a week or two to see the first results of this new understanding. After that, generations of misunderstanding and the force of old habits rendered the family’s transition to non-adversarial ways somewhat uneven. Today, she and her husband, as well as many of my other clients similarly afflicted, are happily convinced by their own experience that children, far from being contrary, are by nature profoundly social.
Expecting them to be so is what allows them to be so. As the parents’ expectation of sociality in the child is perceived by the child, she or he meets that expectation; likewise, the parents’ experience of sociality in the child reinforces their expectation of it. That is how it works. In a gracious letter to me, the husband of my East Coast client wrote, of his wife, their son, and himself: “[We] have grown and learned and loved together in a miraculous way. Our relationships continue to evolve in a totally positive and loving direction.”

Notes:

1. Jean Liedloff, Normal Neurotics Like Us, Mothering, no. 61 (Fall 1991): 32-27.